A ‘Melancholy Occurrence’ in the Alps:
Switzerland, Mont Blanc and an Early Critique of Mountaineering

Simon Bainbridge

> ‘So now, dearest mamma … [f]or an account of Switzerland, and Swiss girls, and Swiss mountains, and Swiss scenery – all that you will please to tell us’. (*Peasants* 11)

One of the most surprisingly influential Romantic-period texts for the nineteenth-century imagining of Switzerland was the anonymous children’s book, *The Peasants of Chamouni*, published in 1823. In this now little-known work, a mother tells her children the story of what is generally considered the first major mountaineering disaster, when an avalanche on Mont Blanc killed three guides in 1820. The text gained its influence through its formative effect on the writer and showman Albert Smith, who is often credited with heightening the popularity of the ‘Swiss’ Alps and Alpine climbing in mid-Victorian Britain.[1] Smith, who climbed Mont Blanc in 1851, devised a spectacular and staggeringly successful public lecture, *The Ascent of Mont Blanc*, which he performed over two thousand times between 1852 and 1858 to an audience of hundreds of thousands. In the best-selling book that accompanied his lecture, *The Story of Mont Blanc*, Smith described the early inspiration for his fascination with the highest mountain in Western Europe:

> Twenty-seven years ago – when children’s books were rare presents, and were so prized, and read, and read again, until the very position of the paragraphs was known by heart – I had a little volume given to me at the Soho bazaar,

> called 'The Peasants of Chamouni,' which told, in a very truthful manner, the sad story of Dr. Hamel's fatal attempt to reach the summit of Mont Blanc in 1820…
>
> My notions of the Alps at that time were very limited … The little book, which I have said had a great air of truth about it, made a deep impression on me: I do not think that 'The Pilgrims Progress' stood in higher favour and this impression lasted from year to year. (Smith 1-2)

The lasting impression of *The Peasants of Chamouni* on Smith, and the book's role through him in popularising Mont Blanc, the Alps and mountaineering, is somewhat ironic given that the text can be seen as an early critique of the developing sport of Alpine climbing and of the growing body of writing that described it. *The Peasants* reworks for a juvenile readership an account of the 1820 disaster contributed to the *New Monthly Magazine* by one of the climbing party, Joseph Dornford. It takes the form of a story told to four children – Lucy, Emma, Elizabeth and Edward – by their mother, Mrs L., a woman storyteller who parallels the woman author (the author uses the third person pronoun 'She' when describing the process of writing in the 'Advertisement'). This remarkable generic transformation, from first-hand periodical essay into children's story, is itself highlighted in the book; the children have overheard their mother reading to their father a French account of the disaster and, misunderstanding its content, request 'an account of Switzerland, and Swiss girls, and Swiss mountains, and Swiss scenery' (*Peasants* 9-11). In response, Mrs L. tells them the story 'of a little tour made by some friends of mine in that country' (*Peasants* 12), a tour which turns out to have included participation in the Mont Blanc disaster itself. While capitalising on the growing popularity of travel writing and particularly on the

emerging genre of mountaineering literature, *The Peasants of Chamouni* significantly reworks its source material to interrogate the class, economic, gender and national politics of the developing sport of Alpine climbing.

I will begin this essay with a brief introductory examination of the genre, form and mode of composition of *The Peasants of Chamouni* which will help explain some of its thematic and factual tensions, especially how the text comes to combine a celebration of a highly romanticised version of Switzerland, particularly its mountain scenery, with a narrative focused on the human cost incurred through the exploration of that scenery, as enacted in the attempt to climb Mont Blanc. The rest of the essay will then seek to read *The Peasants* in relation to its major source text – Dornford's account of the Mont Blanc disaster – and to locate it within the emerging cultures of mountaineering. Placed within these contexts, *The Peasants of Chamouni* can be seen as an early example of a women author rewriting a highly manly text to reveal the gender politics of her source, and in this case to show that the real hardship of the developing sport of mountaineering was felt not by the middle-class British men who undertook it but by the lower-class local guides and their families who provided the sport's infrastructure.

'Something to do with Switzerland': Mont Blanc and the 'Swiss mountains'

According to its 'Advertisement,' *The Peasants of Chamouni* was written with the specific intention of introducing young readers to the Swiss landscape:

> The works of Nature are without limit and without end. In Switzerland they are particularly interesting; and it is with a view of delineating the romantic scenery in which the country abounds, that the writer is induced to place this little book in the juvenile library. (*Peasants*, 'Advertisement,' no page numbers)

The delineation of Swiss romantic scenery that follows is not based on any first-hand experience, however, but is drawn entirely from two other sources, as the author goes some way towards acknowledging:

> She is indebted to Raffles's Tour on the Continent for much of her information; and the authenticity of the melancholy occurrence recorded in the sequel, may be relied upon, for it is compiled from a recent periodical work. (*Peasants*, 'Advertisement,' no page numbers)

At times, *The Peasants of Chamouni* seems like little more than an exercise in cutting and pasting from these two sources, with Mrs L.'s narrative repeating large sections of the works verbatim. The first half of the volume, ostensibly describing the journey of the travelling party of Mrs L.'s friends through Europe and towards Switzerland, relies upon Thomas Raffles' *Letters During a Tour Through some parts of France, Savoy, Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands, in the Summer of 1817*. The second half of the volume, which relates the fatal attempt to climb Mont Blanc, is indeed 'compiled' from Joseph Dornford's two-part essay published in the *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*. Though not formally divided, *The Peasants of Chamouni* is very much a work of two halves, with a large part of the content and character of each half determined by its source.

One consequence of the yoking together of Raffles' and Dornford's texts is that *The Peasants* makes Mont Blanc the focus of its promised account of Switzerland, even though the mountain was not located within the federation of Swiss cantons. During the eighteenth century, the highest point in western Europe was located in the Duchy of Savoy, which prior to Napoleon's conquests in Italy in the 1790s had been part of the Kingdom of Sardinia. Following French occupation in

1792, the region became a département of France, named Mont Blanc after the mountain itself, but with Napoleon's defeat in 1815 it was restored to the Kingdom of Sardinia at the Congress of Vienna. Mont Blanc, then, had never been a part of the complex political entity of Switzerland, but in *The Peasants* the mountain becomes the exemplary feature of Swiss landscape, a not uncommon belief in the early nineteenth century (or indeed the early twenty-first).

In *The Peasants of Chamouni*, the imaginative and symbolic power of the link between Switzerland and Mont Blanc, conflated under the banner term of 'the Alps,' overwhelms the educational aims of this text intended for the 'juvenile library.' Using its pedagogic format of a mother's story to her children, combined with the children's own remarks and questions, *The Peasants* offers a number of definitions of Switzerland, including the cartographical ('Elizabeth had unfolded the large map of Switzerland, and everything appeared in readiness for the recital of Mrs L.'s narrative' (*Peasants* 12)), the geographical, with Edward finding Switzerland on the map and describing its borders, and the administrative or political ('Switzerland is divided into twenty-two cantons, or provinces' (*Peasants* 12)). However, despite the seeming precision of these definitions, Mrs L. and her children all also associate Switzerland more vaguely with the Alps and particularly with Mont Blanc. For example, when Elizabeth unrolls a copy of 'Smith's Comparative View of the Heights of the Principal Mountains, &c. in the World,' Edward asks:

> 'Is it a view in Switzerland? There – there is *Mont Blanc* written in little letters; but how is this? I thought, Elizabeth, that you called it the highest mountain in Switzerland, instead of which, there are many higher.' (*Peasants* 24)

Mont Blanc provides both the focal destination and the primary narrative interest of *The Peasants*' 'account of Switzerland,' as is illustrated by the children's excitement when hearing that the travelling party have reached the Jura mountains:

> 'Now they are actually in Switzerland – my favourite Switzerland!' exclaimed Lucy, clapping her hands, 'for Edward said that Mount Jura divides it from France: and we shall hear, in a minute or two, about *les deux petits Suisses*, and about *Mont Blanc*.' (*Peasants* 48)

Lucy's reaction articulates a romantic imagining of Switzerland not uncommon in the period, presenting it as a place of high mountains and naive peasantry and stripping the federation of its political or religious significance. This process is highlighted by the text's treatment of the Duchy of Savoy, Mont Blanc's location, which is simply associated with the Alps, and not differentiated from Switzerland. Savoy is mentioned only twice: firstly when 'a proposition was made for … Mr. A. and Lorenzo to make a tour through Savoy, with the intent of ascending *Mont Blanc*' (*Peasants* 61) and secondly when the narrator describes how 'as they entered Savoy, the scenery of the Alps appeared before them' (*Peasants* 63). This second sentence adapts Raffles' original: 'A few miles from Geneva we entered Savoy, and passed from the Protestant Republic of Geneva, to the Papal territories of the King of Sardinia. Here the scenery of the Alps began to open before us' (Raffles 173). Where Raffles registers the political and religious significance of Savoy, and its difference from its neighboring state, *The Peasants* effectively conflates it with Switzerland.

The ostensible motivation for Mrs L.'s storytelling in *The Peasants of Chamouni* is her children's desire to be told about Switzerland, a desire prompted by their overhearing snippets of an account she was reading to their father:

> ‘You were reading a tale to papa, one evening, which I know very well had something to do with Switzerland; it was in French; … I am sure it was a pretty tale, for there was something about *un panier de fraises*, a basket of strawberries; and *la petite fille,* the little girl, mamma; and *un bois de sapin, assez épais*, a pretty thick wood of fir-trees; and a great deal more about an Henrietta, and *les deux petits Suisses*.’ (*Peasants* 10)

What is most surprising about *The Peasants of Chamouni* is that though Mrs L. does respond to these requests with a tale of Switzerland that includes these features, the tale itself is one of mountaineering disaster and tragedy, much to the shock and discomfort of her children. To understand how the text treats this narrative, it is necessary first to look at the source from which it was ‘compiled,’ Joseph Dornford’s narrative of his attempt to climb Mont Blanc in 1820, and to locate Dornford’s account within the wider contexts of the development of mountaineering and its literature that had occurred in the previous half century.

Joseph Hamel and Joseph Dornford: Scientific vs. Recreational Mountaineering

Joseph Dornford had just graduated from Oxford University and was ‘devoting a part of the long vacation to a Continental tour’ (Dornford 452) when, along with his friend Gilbert Henderson, he attached himself to a party hoping to make the fifteenth successful attempt to summit Mont Blanc, the first ascent of which in 1786 is often seen to mark the birth of mountaineering. Dornford’s expedition party was led by a Russian scientist, Dr Joseph Hamel, who would publish his own account of the resulting disaster, ‘Relation de Deux Tentatives Récentes pour Monter sur le Mont-Blanc (‘An Account of Two Recent Attempts to Ascend Mont Blanc’), in the August number of *Bibliothéque Universelle.* Hamel’s text, which provides an illuminating

contrast to Dornford's narrative, was quickly translated and printed in a number of British periodicals, including the *Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany* of October 1820 (from which I have taken my translation). In a lengthy review of Hamel's account, *The British Critic* called upon the two British participants to offer their accounts of the story, inviting them to 'favour the world with some account of their arduous and highly interesting though unsuccessful expedition' (*British Critic* 465). Such requests came not only in print. Maria Edgeworth, who was in Switzerland at the time, relates how a few days after the accident Joseph Dornford arrived dramatically at a breakfast party attended by 'many scientific and literary people ... beg[ging] permission to state the plain facts, as he heard they had been told to Dr. Hamel's disadvantage' (Edgeworth 3). Dornford offered his account to the assembled gathering and subsequently published his version of events in January 1821in the *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, utilising 'the substance of a narrative drawn up, soon after my return to England, for the satisfaction of my friends' (Dornford 451).

While prompted by the specific events of 1820, Hamel's and Dornford's texts can also both be seen as contributions to the developing genre of mountaineering literature, and particularly to the emergent subgenre of ascent narratives focused on Mont Blanc. The growing number of periodicals and magazines provided an ideal outlet for this subgenre, the exciting accounts being relatively short, self-contained and of general interest. The earliest account of the first ascent of Mont Blanc in English was published in *The Scots Magazine* in November 1786, stirringly referenced in the Index as 'Hazardous journey to the top of Mount Blanc' (*Scots Magazine* 526) and it became standard practice for those who climbed or attempted to climb the mountain to publish their 'Narratives' or 'Accounts' or to present their

findings to learned bodies such as the Royal Society, publishing them in the 'Proceedings' of the respective learned body.[2] Alongside these individual accounts, there also developed the collective history of attempted ascents on Mont Blanc, perhaps most notably William Coxe's 'chronological account of the principal expeditions, which have at length terminated successfully' in his *Travels in Switzerland* of 1789, which he updated in subsequent editions (Coxe 10). The popularity of these ascent narratives and the growing demand for them has already been indicated by the *British Critic*'s lengthy review of Hamel and its call for Dornford and Henderson to offer their versions of events, and is further testified to by the fact that Dornford's essay was published in the high-profile location of the first volume of the re-launched *New Monthly Magazine*, a periodical that published several other mountaineering narratives in the following decade.

Joseph Dornford was an early example of what might be termed a recreational mountaineer and his identity as such is best appreciated through contrast with the more established role of the scientific mountaineer, a part played by his expedition leader, Dr Joseph Hamel. Hamel's stated motivation for climbing Mont Blanc was entirely scientific, as he explained in the opening sentence of his 'Relation':

> From the first period of my acquaintance with the journeys and the labours of the celebrated Saussure of Geneva, I have always felt a strong inclination to visit the valley of Chamouny, and, above all, to see Mont Blanc, that king of mountains, conquered by the perseverance of this indefatigable investigator of nature. (Hamel 329)

Here Hamel locates himself within the tradition of scientific mountaineering inaugurated by the Genevan naturalist and founding father of Alpinism, Horace-Bénédict de Saussure. De Saussure was a key figure in the history and literature of

high-altitude mountaineering who in 1760 had contributed to the interest in climbing Mont Blanc by offering a reward to the first person to reach its summit, a reward claimed by the guide Jacques Balmat in 1786 when he became the first man to stand on the mountain's top, along with Dr Michael Paccard. De Saussure himself reached the summit the following year, where he spent four and a half hours undertaking experiments; as he stated in his 'Relation Abrégée d'un Voyage à la Cime du Mont-Blanc' ('A Short Narrative of a Journey to the Summit of Mont Blanc'), 'my object was not solely getting to the top; I wanted there to make observations and experiments which would make this undertaking valuable' (De Saussure 704). De Saussure believed that these high-altitude experiments and observations could reveal the secret of the major scientific puzzle of the period, the earth's geological origin and history, commenting that if 'the highest rocks of Mont Blanc ... could answer my questions, they would unveil to me all the mysteries of the formation and revolutions of our globe' (De Saussure 708). In de Saussure, mountaineering and scientific enquiry merged to produce the Enlightenment project in its most visionary form.

For Hamel, de Saussure embodied the emerging concept of mountaineering as a daring enactment of the Enlightenment's information-gathering project.[3] In the opening of his 'Relation,' quoted above, Hamel uses a rhetoric of 'conquest' to present his inspiring precursor as an enlightenment hero who has overcome Mont Blanc through both his ascent of the mountain in 1787 and his tireless scientific investigations. As the 'indefatigable investigator of nature' and 'conqueror' of 'that king of mountains,' De Saussure provided the inspiration and validation for Hamel's own attempt on the mountain in 1820. The Russian's account of this disastrous attempt emphasises the scientific motivation of his expedition and outlines his planned experiments, which included ascertaining the height of the mountain through

the use of ‘many barometers’ (he took four), utilizing lenses to examine the sun’s effects, using lime-water to test for carbon in the atmosphere, burning alcohol-soaked sponges, collecting summit air in sealed flasks, cooking a chicken, measuring the boiling point of water, sketching a panorama and recording the temperature, electricity and humidity of the atmosphere. Potentially, however, Hamel’s most original scientific contribution would have been in the field of physiology, an area that de Saussure had been criticised for neglecting.[4] Though the ensuing disaster prevented Hamel from undertaking his proposed ‘observations relative to the effect of rarefied air upon animal organization’ (Hamel 311), he has recently been reassessed as an important pioneer of experimental high-altitude physiology and medicine (Simon and Oelz 547).

In total contrast to Hamel, Joseph Dornford had no interest in science. As he wrote of his own narrative, ‘the scientific reader ... will probably rise disappointed from the perusal of this account,’ and he referred such a reader to Hamel’s pamphlet and to de Saussure’s description of his 1787 ascent (Dornford 517). While de Saussure was the model of scientific mountaineer for Hamel, he was important as a pioneering summiteer for Dornford.[5] Concerned that the reader may not know who de Saussure was, Dornford writes in a footnote: ‘As this name has already occurred more than once, it will be proper to inform the reader, that he was a gentleman of Geneva, who, in August 1787, succeeded in reaching the summit of Mont Blanc. This was the year following the first ascent, made by Dr Paccard’ (Dornford 462). For Dornford, de Saussure’s writings were of no interest as studies of natural science but were valuable as early climbing guides, providing a source for routes, timings and mountain craft.

Dornford gives no real account of his motivation in climbing Mont Blanc, simply stating that: ‘I had, before leaving England, set my heart upon ascending Mont Blanc, and found no difficulty in prevailing on my companion [Gilbert Henderson], who had already made the tour of the greater part of Switzerland, to accompany me’ (Dornford 452). Reading Dornford’s narrative, however, it becomes clear that mountaineering enabled him to participate in a physically and psychologically challenging activity that performed and tested a particular heroic, masculine identity. His text offers a very early articulation of the idea of mountaineering as a challenge or a test, an idea that would become a key trope in writing about the activity but which is normally seen as emerging in the Victorian period.[6] On first seeing the intimidating route up Mont Blanc, for example, with its crossing of the ‘insurmountable barrier’ of the Bossons glacier and the ‘precipitous’ and ‘almost perpendicular’ climb that followed, Dornford comments that ‘we felt equal to any thing; and if a thought of the danger of the enterprise crossed the mind, it was only to give an additional zest to the proud consciousness of having a heart that could brave it’ (Dornford 456). In Dornford’s account, ‘danger’ becomes an essential element of mountaineering, a necessary hazard required so that the climber can prove his bravery. For this type of mountaineer, climbing is not only worth the risk but requires risk to make it worthwhile.

Dornford particularly conceived the challenge of mountaineering in military terms. As an undergraduate, he had left Trinity College, Cambridge to serve as a volunteer in the Peninsular War and he repeatedly represents the Mont Blanc expedition through military terms and figures. Examples include the following: on the night before departure, he and his party are ‘treated with something of that kind of respect, which is paid to the leaders of the forlorn hope on the eve of the storming of a

town' (Dornford 453); the guides are appointed 'to muster in marching order at four o'clock the following morning' (Dornford 453); while encamped at the Grand Mulets for an extra day due to bad weather, '[o]ur amusements, during the day of our compelled halt, were very similar to those of a picquet on an outpost, which commands a view of the enemy's camp' (Dornford 461); one of the guides stood sentry on an elevated post' (Dornford 457); and the descent 'reminded me strongly of a night-march in the Pyrenees' (Dornford 513). This sense of mountaineering as a continuation of, parallel to, and substitute for martial service is seen most clearly when Dornford describes the climbing party setting out:

> Our caravan now assumed a most romantic appearance; the costume of the guides, each with a French knapsack, and one or two with pelisses, being decidedly military. It reminded me strongly of a party of Guerillas in the Pyrenees, where uniformity in dress or appointment was considered as an unnecessary refinement. We had each a large straw hat tied under the chin, and a spiked-pole, about eight feet long, in our hands. Besides this, our shoes were furnished with short spikes at the heels to assist us in the descent. We were clothed as lightly as possible, that the motion of our limbs might not be impeded, for we were told to expect a march of eleven or twelve hours, the latter half of which was to be spent in climbing. (Dornford 453-4)

Here mountaineering and military identities merge as Dornford produces a heroic imagining of himself and his party. As Dornford's emphasis on costume and equipment suggests, this heroic self-imaging could be realised through performance, involving not only the activity itself – 'the motion of our limbs', to use Dornford's phrase – but also the validation provided by an audience.

Mountaineering on Mont Blanc had always been a spectator sport, watched from the valley below or from the surrounding smaller peaks, often through telescopes. During the first ascent of 1786, for example, Jacques Balmat had made arrangements with the villagers of Chamonix to witness the climb and had waved to them with a red flag from the summit. There was a strongly gendered dimension to such performances; de Saussure exchanged signals with his wife and her sisters, for example. Though one woman, Marie Paradis in 1808, had ascended Mont Blanc, climbing the mountain was overwhelmingly conceived as a masculine activity performed for an audience of women (and less able men). This was certainly how Dornford thought of his ascent, writing that 'We had also with us some rockets and Bengal-lights, which we had promised the ladies below to exhibit from our halting-place for the night' (Dornford 453). But Dornford also performed for another audience, the rest of his climbing party, in front of whom he was determined to show no signs of fear. He describes how he concealed his 'tendency to dizziness ... so successfully, that I believe neither the guides nor my companions had any suspicion of it' (Dornford 455). It was by 'following de Saussure's advice, in the published account of his ascent, and fixing my eyes steadfastly upon the precipice' that Dornford accustomed himself 'to the view, and was soon enabled to pursue my path with the greatest confidence' (Dornford 455). Dornford presents this overcoming of his fear as essential to the pursuit of the ascent:

> This was a very necessary preparatory discipline, to fit us for the infinitely more formidable passage of the glacier, during the whole of which I was perfectly cool and collected. I mention this for the purpose of encouraging those, who may shrink from such an undertaking, from a distrust of the strength of their nerves. (Dornford 455)

Dornford's narrative, which continues to emphasise the dangers of the ascent and the potentially fatal consequences of a slip (Dornford 458), is testimony to his claiming of a martial, masculine identity through mountaineering. Though the ascent of Mont Blanc was ultimately unsuccessful, Dornford presents himself as able to master his fear and to overcome danger and in so doing to provide an example for future climbers.

The death of the three guides who were swept into a crevasse by an avalanche near Mont Blanc's summit called into question mountaineering's ethos, whether the nascent activity was justified as the advancement of science or as an opportunity to display heroic masculinity. Hamel briefly registers the traumatic effect of the fatal avalanche on the three non-guiding members of the party, writing of the moment when they learned of the guides' disappearance that 'I am unable to describe what then passed in my mind. I saw Mr Dornford throw himself on the snow in despair; and Mr Henderson was in a state which alarmed me for the consequence' (Hamel 335). Forced by the remaining guides to abandon his search for their missing colleagues, Hamel describes how on the descent, 'absorbed in the horror of the event, I had become insensible to the sentiment of danger, and I cleared, without reflection, all the crevices' (Hamel 335). However, Hamel conveys no sense of regret at the consequences of his expedition and, rather than reflecting on the human cost of his scientific project, concludes his account with 'a few words in explanation of our unhappy accident,' by which he means a scientific explanation of avalanches, 'a kind of danger against which it will be very difficult to find a preservative' (Hamel 335-7). Hamel's narrative emphasises that if there is a justification for high-altitude mountaineering, with what is being recognised for the first time as its potentially fatal consequences, it lies not in aesthetics or in physical pleasure, but in science, an

argument that continued to be made in the following decades.[7] Yet though Hamel published an extended account of his Mont Blanc research the following year, he never returned to the mountain or carried out further work on the effect of thin air (Simons and Oelz 548). Mont Blanc had revealed the limits of the Enlightenment project. The 1820 avalanche had taken the ground from under the feet of the scientist mountaineer intent on conquering nature through an ascent to the summit.

If the possibility of death called into question the validity of scientific mountaineering, in Dornford's account it served to emphasise the bravery of the heroic mountaineer such as himself. Dornford not only returned to the mountain but also on at least one occasion offered advice on how best to ascend it. H. H. Jackson recounts in his 'Narrative of an Ascent to the Summit of Mont Blanc' how he was 'so fortunate' as to meet Dornford at Chamonix before his own successful summit attempt in 1823. Dornford described to Jackson 'exactly how the accident happened,' the latter adding 'I believe it may in great measure, if not entirely, be attributed to the imprudence of [the guide] Marie Coutet, who, although he was aware of the danger they had to encounter, still agreed to hazard it, without disclosing its extent to those of the party who were ignorant of it' (Jackson 464). By retelling his story, Dornford absolved himself of blame, at least as far as Jackson was concerned. It would take another retelling of Dornford's story, that provided in *The Peasants of Chamouni*, to fully register the cost of the desire to climb Mont Blanc.

<u>*The Peasants of Chamouni* and the critique of mountaineering</u>

The Peasants of Chamouni was a crucial text in the history of mountaineering literature because it made mountaineering imaginatively available for a young readership in an unprecedented way, relocating it from the scientific journals and the

periodical press into the 'juvenile library.' As a result, it was possible for young readers to enjoy the thrills of the climb, as we have already noted in the influential case of Albert Smith. However, by bringing the story of the Mont Blanc disaster into the nursery, *The Peasants of Chamouni* became one the first of many texts to register the potential damage that mountaineering can do to the home, the family and the locality that provides the base for the attempt to conquer nature.[8] Through its form and its thematic additions, *The Peasants* interrogates the relationship between the mountain summit and the domestic sphere.

As described above, in *The Peasants of Chamouni* Mrs L. responds to her children's requests for 'an account of Switzerland, and Swiss girls, and Swiss mountains, and Swiss scenery' by telling them the story 'of a little tour made by some friends of mine in that country' (*Peasants* 12), a tour which turns out to have included participation in the Mont Blanc disaster. Her account is based very heavily on Dornford's narrative, retaining the figure of Hamel but replacing Dornford and Henderson with the fictional figures of her friend Mr A. and his son Lorenzo, a university student, who decide to make 'a tour through Savoy, with the intent of ascending *Mont Blanc*' (*Peasants* 61). Yet if the personnel of the climbing party remain basically unchanged in *The Peasants of Chamouni*, the text's author dramatically alters the context of the attempted ascent through the addition of fictional family members of both the climbers and the guides. Mr A.'s travelling party also includes his sixteen-year-old daughter Henrietta and, by the time they reach Chamonix, her cousin Caroline, who both intend to stay in the village and watch the ascent. In the village, this party meet the family of Pierre Carrier, one of the guides who will die in the accident. This family is almost entirely fictional. While none of the three guides who were killed were married, one of them, Pierre Carrier, had 'an

aged father, who had been wholly dependent upon him for support,' according to Dornford (Dornford 513). The author of *The Peasants of Chamouni* expands this family to include Carrier's wife, Janette, and his eight children. To the original source material, then, the author adds three fictional family groupings (the children listening to the story; Henrietta and Caroline; and Pierre Carrier's family). At generic, narrative, and thematic levels, the text examines the attempt on Mont Blanc through the lenses of the domestic and the familial, highlighting the consequences of individual masculine ambition on others, and especially on the family.

Though *The Peasants of Chamouni*'s author draws very heavily on Dornford's account, often following her source word for word, she does more than simply compile. Rather, her text can be seen as a significant reworking of the original, providing a deliberately feminised revision of a highly masculine contribution to an already manly genre, and offering a critique of the values that underpin that genre. Part of this process of revision consists of the removal and qualification of Dornford's heroic and masculine presentation of himself and his party. The author deletes nearly all her source's military references and, while repeating Dornford's description of the climbing party as 'romantic' and 'decidedly military', she adds the strong qualification 'and somewhat grotesque' (*Peasants* 79), significantly undermining the sense of the expedition's glamour. Similarly, while again repeating verbatim the opening of the passage in which Dornford first sees the route up the mountain, with the 'insurmountable obstacle' of the Bossons glacier and the 'almost perpendicular' climb to follow, the author removes her source's statement about 'the proud consciousness of having a heart that could brave it,' removing the 'challenge' element of Dornford's narrative (*Peasants* 94). As a result, Mr A.'s and Lorenzo's attempt on Mont Blanc becomes entirely unmotivated.

The generic reshaping of mountaineering writing as a children's story can also be seen as part of *The Peasants*' inherent critique of climbing, establishing an association between ascent and childishness, and particularly boyishness, that is reinforced by the listening children's comments. For example, his sister mockingly recalls the exploits of Edward, the only boy among the four listening children:

> 'And I remember, too,' said Elizabeth, 'that you rode upon a donkey up the [Malvern] hills one day, and when you were upon the top, you fancied yourself a wonderful traveller, and told papa when you came down, that you had been on the top of the highest mountain in the world, and you actually thought so, till we corrected your error.' (*Peasants* 26-7)

While this teasing anecdote is used in part to establish the grandeur of the Alps, as opposed to the Malvern hills, it also suggests that young Edward's sense of self-aggrandisement through climbing and his desire to impress his father may also be the motivations that drive the more ambitious mountaineering project (the father-son structure is, or course, replayed in the narrative by Mr A. and Lorenzo).

The Peasants of Chamouni further undercuts Dornford's account through its structure, which repeatedly juxtaposes the progress of the climbing party with scenes depicting the anxiety of those waiting in the valley below. It disrupts his monologic narrative by inserting the reactions of the four children listening to the story, as when Lucy's comment that 'I hope nothing of any serious account will happen to our party, and, to tell the truth, I shall be glad when they are safely down again, because you look so serious, mamma' (*Peasants* 105). The focus of the listening children's sympathy is not the climbers but their families waiting in the valley. For the children listening to their mother's tale, the anxiety experienced by Henrietta and Caroline exceeds the sufferings of those climbing the mountain. Of the overnight camp at the

Grand Mulets, Edward remarks ‘What a dreadful situation to be placed in! ... and poor Henrietta and Caroline! theirs must have been even more deplorable’ (*Peasants* 106). Through the narrative form of her text, the author creates a child’s-eye view of the events on Mont Blanc, one which links the children listening to the story with those waiting at the bottom of the mountain for their relatives to return. In place of the heroism, excitement and daring of Dornford’s account, *The Peasants of Chamouni* emphasises waiting, anxiety and, ultimately, loss.

While the author of *The Peasants of Chamouni* uses the two British families to create an alternative perspective on the disaster on Mont Blanc, she focuses on the fictionalised family of the guide Pierre Carrier as an emblem of its human cost and its impact on the residents of the valley. Throughout the text, Carrier’s family are presented as an ideal version of the family unit, ‘strangers to trouble; satisfied with what Providence allowed as the reward of their industry, they coveted nothing more, and the clouds of adversity had never hovered around their humble but peaceful dwelling’ (*Peasants* 71-2). It is this Edenic world that is destroyed by the climbing tragedy, and the climbers themselves recognise their responsibility in the aftermath of the avalanche:

> ‘When, at last, the dreadful truth burst upon them, their feelings may, perhaps, be conceived, but cannot be expressed. The idea of the grief that would overwhelm poor Janette, the wife of Pierre Carrier, and the mother of eight children, who were all dependant upon him for support, rushed upon their minds with indescribable force, and they could not but reproach themselves as having, unconsciously, been the cause of the affliction into which his family would be thrown.’ (*Peasants* 144-5)

Here the author draws on, but significantly rewrites, Dornford's original, which reads as follows:

> When the sad truth burst upon us, our feelings may, perhaps, be conceived, but cannot be expressed. The first reflection made involuntarily by each of us – 'I have caused the death of those brave fellows,' however it was afterwards over-ruled in our calmer moments, was then replete with unutterable distress. (Dornford 510)

Dornford's tortured syntax enacts his grappling with a powerful sense of personal guilt. Yet while he acknowledges that his initial response was a feeling of responsibility for having caused the guides' deaths, he argues that this was a mistaken, heat-of-the-moment over-reaction that he has since been able to correct when considering the matter more carefully. In her revisions of the passage in *The Peasants of Chamouni*, however, the author allows the climbers no freedom from their burden of guilt and presents their grief not as a result of having caused the death of 'brave fellows,' as Dornford had done, but at having devastated a family. This sense of familial destruction is reinforced through the addition of a new scene not in Dornford, in which Mr A. breaks the news of the disaster to the family, shattering forever the idyll of family contentment that existed before the summit attempt.

Writing for children and viewing the 1820 disaster on Mont Blanc through juvenile eyes, *The Peasants of Chamouni* provides one of the earliest critiques of the emergent sport of mountaineering and of the literature that was developing around it. While celebrating the scenery of Switzerland, *The Peasants* emphasised the risks of climbing in the 'Swiss mountains' and the costs incurred by those who sought to conquer the pre-eminent 'work of Nature,' Mont Blanc. As the sport developed through the nineteenth century, the author of *The Peasants* was joined by more

famous voices in protesting against the life-endangering pursuit, including *The Times* ('Why is the best blood of England to waste itself in scaling hitherto inaccessible peaks, in staining the eternal snows and reaching the unfathomable abyss never to return?'(Fleming 291)), John Ruskin, who accused climbers of treating the Alps as 'soaped poles in bear-gardens' (Ruskin 89-90), and even Queen Victoria, whose private secretary wrote to Prime Minister Gladstone in 1884: 'The Queen commands me to ask you if you think she can say anything to mark her disapproval of the dangerous Alpine excursions which this year have occasioned so much loss of life' (Fleming 298). Where *The Peasants of Chamouni* differs from these later critiques is in its emphasis on the damage done by mountaineering not to the British climbers who participated in it in the name of science or sport but to the guides who made it possible and to their families, the peasants of Chamonix themselves.

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[1] See Hansen *passim* and Colley 78-91.

[2] For a full list of narrative of successful ascents, see Montagnier. Mont Blanc was not the only subject of such accounts; see, for example, Ramond. Such discrete ascent narratives were sometimes produced by extracting passages from larger works. See, for example, Humboldt.

[3] See, for example, the report of the first ascent of Mont Blanc in the *Journal Polytype des Sciences et des Arts* in Engel 100-1: 'A wish to know and observe, the noblest of all passions, helps man to attempt the most courageous things; this virtuous ambition brings out an infinitely sweet delight which draws no regret in its train, the aim being to enlighten other men by increasing the empire of science and multiplying observations.'

[4] See, for example, 'The effect of the rarefied air on the human body, is little noticed by M. De Saussure among his other observations' in 'Article III' 539.

[5] For a useful differentiation between the mountaineer, interested in the experience on the mountain as a *relationship* with that mountain, and the summiteer, driven by *a desire to reach the summit at all costs*, and in so doing confirm his or her ability to gain self-affirmation by the accomplishment of a goal, see Sailors.

[6] See Robbins and Hansen.

[7] See, for example, Clark 296: '[The author] must honestly avow, that as a mere ramble to gratify curiosity, the excursion deserves no credit, and perhaps is barely justifiable ... Should the interests of science require an ascent, then the matter is wholly altered.'

[8] For a modern equivalent, see Coffey.